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Negotiating Work and Family: Aspirations of Early Radcliffe Graduates

Jo Anne Preston

In 1928 Radcliffe president Ada Comstock, announced, “We have come to see, I believe, that marriage is essentially far more compatible with continuation of a woman’s career than has been assumed.”¹ The inspiration for Comstock’s remark was the surprising affirmation by five decades of former students that women could indeed successfully combine a career with marriage. To commemorate 50 years of offering higher education to women, the Radcliffe College Alumnae Association had just completed a thorough and far-reaching survey of all living graduates, nongraduates, and graduate students. The survey was unusual in two respects: first, it polled women both on information about their lives and on their opinions concerning a number of personal and social issues; second, it received an unusually high response rate of 56 percent of those polled, or 3,567 questionnaires completed and returned. Another noteworthy contribution, and one that caught Comstock’s attention, was Radcliffe women’s response to the question, “Can a woman successfully carry on a career and marriage simultaneously?” In an era of considerable disapproval of working wives and substantial barriers to women progressing in careers, an astonishingly high percentage of those who answered the question responded positively: 73 percent thought women could successfully combine marriage and a career. That question was followed by, “Can she, if she has children?” In response

to the second question, Radcliffe graduates were less encouraging; still, 49 percent thought or wished it would be possible.²

Barbara Solomon and Patricia Nolan in their analysis of the 1928 survey concluded that the conviction among a significant number of early Radcliffe graduates that women could combine careers, marriage, and children was especially impressive given prevailing practices and attitudes. Solomon and Nolan noted that the married women in the survey were more positive about combining career and marriage than the single women, but they also noted that most of these married women had not achieved the goal they described.³ Detailed employment and family histories reveal that Radcliffe women, like other college-educated women, faced formidable obstacles. Claudia Goldin, in her study of women college graduates in the twentieth century, concluded that those who graduated between 1900 and 1920 were required to choose between marriage and a career.⁴ Few were able to achieve the integration of marriage and career that Harvard women seek today.

If the actual life histories of Radcliffe graduates show that their predictions were too hopeful, what then accounted for their initial optimism? An explanation cannot be found in the prevailing social norms or opportunity structures. Women entering Radcliffe in the first three decades of the twentieth century encountered frustrating and conflicting messages: strive for equality in educational opportunities but not in career opportunities; put your education to good use but not in the most prestigious and powerful professions; be independent but expect to be financially supported by your prospective husband. Their optimism might be better explained by considering the kinds of women who chose

to attend Radcliffe College. They were women who yearned for the opportunity to obtain an education that would not just be the rough equivalent of those offered to Harvard men but would in fact comprise lectures given by the very same professors. One respondent replied that she would attend Radcliffe again “for the instruction by Harvard professors.” In comparison to the other “Seven Sisters”--Vassar, Smith, Mount Holyoke, Wellesley, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard--Radcliffe College drew the student body most interested in academic pursuits and least interested in social activities.⁵ The alumnae responses on the 1928 questionnaire confirm the intellectual focus of the college. One answered the question concerning whether she would choose Radcliffe again with “Yes, I should say that the education at Radcliffe is taken more seriously than at many other colleges.” Yet another answered in the affirmative and characterized the student body as “[having] a greater interest and success in intellectual pursuits than in others.”⁶

Over the course of their Radcliffe education, women grew more independent and challenged the beliefs and practices that restricted their progress. In reunion books and surveys, many graduates testified to the transformative power of attending Radcliffe College. A 1910 graduate conveyed the following to her fiftieth reunion classmates: “To quote Stevenson, ‘Radcliffe stabbed me broad awake’.” By invoking this phrase from Robert Louis Stevenson, she endeavored to show how Radcliffe woke her up, apparently somewhat painfully, to worlds of which she had been previously unaware, worlds in which new modes of living could be forged. As a result of her awakening to new possibilities for women, she later became the president of the Lowell (Massachusetts) Equal Suffrage League.⁷

In spite of rising expectations, a deeply gendered labor market, one in which gender operated at different levels and in different ways, proved a formidable obstacle to early Radcliffe graduates. Exclusionary policies in the most powerful and prestigious professions slowed their progress. In medicine, the turn-of-the-century efforts to upgrade and regularize medical education led to the closing of women's medical schools. By 1903 only three women's medical colleges remained. With women excluded from most others or admitted only in very small numbers, the number of female physicians dwindled. Women's opportunities in the legal profession were just as limited. Few law schools would admit women and nationally before 1900 only 200 women had earned a law degree. In the greater Boston area, for instance, only Boston University Law School admitted women and then only a few of them over a decade.⁸ Frustrated by their limited opportunities for obtaining a legal education, Radcliffe students in 1915 lobbied the Harvard Law School to admit women. One of the students, Elizabeth Chadwick Beale, whose father taught at the Law School, prevailed on him and his colleagues to found the Cambridge Law School for Women. Unfortunately, after Elizabeth's departure following the first year, the school survived only an additional year, as Professor Beale lost interest and withdrew his support. Women fared no better in the equally high status but much less lucrative profession of the ministry. At the turn of the century, as a result of discriminatory practices in both professional education and in ordination, less than 4 percent of all ordained ministers were women.⁹

Because of the limited opportunities in law, medicine, and the ministry, Radcliffe graduates in the first three decades of the century sought careers in the traditional

women's professions. The prospect of continuing their intellectual pursuits made teaching a more attractive option to many than social work, librarianship, or nursing. For those who graduated from 1900 to 1920, over 40 percent taught at some time in their lives. In the class of 1900, 49 women, or 78 percent of the class, became teachers. In the next two decades a smaller but still significant percentage of graduates taught for some portion of their lives: 62 percent of the class of 1910 spent part of their postgraduate lives teaching, while only 41 percent of the class of 1920 taught. For the small number of African American graduates of Radcliffe College, whose career choices were even more constricted, 52 percent of the 21 who attended Radcliffe College from 1900 to 1920 became teachers.¹⁰

Recognizing that educated women aspired to become teachers and that schools constituted a primary employer of college-educated women, Radcliffe College sought to increase its students' opportunities by offering education courses and negotiating with some cities and towns to place Radcliffe students in city schools to learn new methods of teaching. Education courses were offered as early as 1895, including courses on the history and current status of educational theory, and, for graduates exclusively, a seminar on pedagogy. The offerings in education grew so that by 1920 the college sponsored three courses for undergraduates and graduates and three restricted to graduate students. When, in the second decade of the twentieth century, public school boards began to require that prospective teachers complete a year of formal teaching under the supervision of the public schools before appointment, Radcliffe College made an arrangement with area public schools for Radcliffe College students to teach in these

schools. Radcliffe repaid the towns by allowing a certain number of public school teachers to be admitted to Radcliffe without charge. Moreover, Radcliffe extended to other teachers a special rate or “teachers’ fee” for courses offered at Radcliffe, which strengthened the connection between the college and the teaching profession.¹¹ Radcliffe voted to institute all of these measures, not so much to encourage women to enter teaching as to accommodate the need for employment of college-educated women.

Other forces were at work, however. When in 1900 the proportion of women teachers in New England schools grew to over 80 percent, school boards began to pass local ordinances banning the employment of married women or the retention of female teachers who married. Nor was the opposition to women teachers limited to local school officials. Even those in prominent positions supported the campaign against the employment of married female teachers. In 1904, A. E. Winship, the editor of the *Boston Globe*, argued that marriage should be a factor in the selection of female teachers. By 1913 public commentary over the hiring of married women rose to such a level that Charles Eliot, the former president of Harvard, felt compelled to contribute to the debate. Married women, he pronounced, should not be employed in the schools, and furthermore, no woman, single or married, should be employed in teaching for more than five years. But at the time of his remarks, Radcliffe graduates were entering teaching in large numbers with the aspirations of combining a career with marriage, and Radcliffe College administrators, by securing connections with local schools and by offering courses in education, attempted to support their graduates’ choices.¹²

A concerted and widespread ideological campaign accompanied the marriage ban. Public officials at the turn of the century began to speak out against female teachers' predominance in the schools--a phenomenon they termed overfeminization. A specific target of this campaign was the removal of all married female teachers from the schools, justified by two arguments: first, that married women teachers had an adverse effect upon students, and second, that married women teachers neglected their duties at home and thus weakened the social and economic fabric of society. The second view gained force with the growing apprehension concerning the employment of married women in any occupation.¹³

Radcliffe College graduates who sought teaching careers were gravely affected by the campaign against married women teachers. Those who chose to marry were forced out of their teaching positions. Of those graduates who entered teaching from 1900 to 1930, half of the women ended their teaching careers when they married. Few women continued teaching in the public schools after marriage.¹⁴

Radcliffe College Graduates' Recommendations

What were the strategies that respondents to the 1928 survey proposed that would enable a woman to pursue a career while married or while raising children? Since the questionnaire allowed for open-ended responses, many volunteered their advice on how this goal could be achieved. Their responses were thoughtful and pragmatic, showing a realistic sense of the challenges they faced. For all their optimism, these women understood the world in which they lived, and they mobilized the resources at their

disposal in order to overcome obstacles. One sometimes reads in what they wrote the blunt terseness of a seasoned veteran: "As one who has tried, I don't see why not." Others contributed their own thoughtful observations of women who successfully combined a career and marriage: "I know many who do"; "Yes--so far as I have observed it from friends and relatives"; "A large number of women have proven this"; and "Yes, my mother proved it."

Many who registered positive responses prefaced them with the word "depends." What successfully combining marriage and a career depended on varied. A careful choice of a husband was a frequent recommendation. It is possible to interpret these responses as qualifications--a woman can have a career only so long as her husband will tolerate it. But it is equally plausible to see these responses as pragmatic and positive, requiring women who would combine marriage and career to bear that ambition in mind when they weighed potential husbands. As one former Radcliffe student stated decisively: "Yes, if she has the right husband." She did not specify what she meant by "right," but others made some proposals. One respondent cautioned that the goal could be achieved if the woman "has the cooperation physical and spiritual of her husband." Another wrote: "it depends on the husband's character among other factors." None went so far as to prescribe husbands' sharing of domestic tasks, but many felt that it would not be impossible to find a husband who would approve of their career ambitions.

A second ingredient for successfully combining marriage and career was a strong constitution, which suggests that women would still be responsible for all domestic work. Respondents felt strongly that the double burden of a career and homemaking would

require an enormous amount of physical stamina. One respondent enumerated a number of qualities: “It depends on the woman, her health and disposition, as well as her training.” Mental as well as physical abilities--not just a woman’s intelligence and education but also her insight and common sense--could be needed. One respondent agreed that a woman could combine marriage and career “if she has brains and strength sufficient.”

Although good health and husbands’ cooperation were important, former Radcliffe students recognized that they were not enough. Changes in conditions at home and at work were essential to combine marriage and career successfully. As one wrote: “That depends so largely on conditions that it can not be answered in one word.” Some located the difficulty in the home. One believed a woman could achieve both “for a while if she had help in the house.” Others understood that the careful choice of career would facilitate combining it with a marriage. One elaborated on this condition by suggesting that combining career with marriage would not be feasible “unless the woman can control hours of work.” Choice of career, of course, was only one factor. As one graduate responded, “It depends on the woman, the husband, the pocketbook, and what career.”

Although they considered it a more difficult achievement, the respondents cited conditions under which the integration of raising children and managing a career would be possible. As one respondent wrote: “It depends on her job. I think a woman could paint or write as these things can be set aside or done at her convenience. She might attend to real estate or advertising, [not] to be tied to hours.” Another offered: “Yes, if

she chooses occupations which can be adjusted to the demands of childbearing and homemaking.” More hesitant in her support, one graduate replied, “I think she can with changes of hours and curriculum when the children are very young.” A small minority advised that careers should be subordinated to childrearing. One 1910 graduate wrote, “Only if career is very flexible in its demands and is admittedly of secondary importance.” In addition to a career with flexible hours, respondents recommended employing other women for child care when economically practical. One graduate approved combining a career with raising children “if she could afford expert outside care for children,” though the graduates anticipated that women would still need to supervise the child care. Thus a successful women would need to be a “skillful manager and a good instructor of assistants,” stressed a 1908 graduate.

In addition, respondents regarded the timing and location of a mother’s work as crucial to success in combining childrearing and a career. A 1920 graduate tartly and forthrightly replied to the question concerning combining children and careers: “Not very successfully unless her work be done at home”; and another: “If the career allows her to remain at home, yes, otherwise no.” The timing of childbearing needed to be coordinated with career development, according to some respondents. A 1910 graduate recommended that a woman could successfully combine a career and childrearing if “before she has [children] she has progressed sufficiently in her career to be able to leave it temporarily to be independent.” Conversely, the timing of combining career and childrearing could depend on the age of the children. Many respondents felt that women could not engage in careers when their children were young. The suggestions varied as to

the appropriate age of the children, but most respondents thought that women could have careers once their children entered school.

Though practical suggestions predominated, some women indicated that social conditions could affect a woman's success. A 1915 graduate thought women could combine marriage, children, and career if "she is in a community where other women are trying it." Another respondent perceived that women could do it but that it would be "Difficult because of society and the interruption during childbearing." A few even speculated on the positive outcomes for others if a woman could combine career, marriage, and childrearing. One graduate concluded from her observations of relatives that, when mothers have careers, "children seem to have more respect for the abilities of the mother."

Career and Marriage in the Lives of Three Radcliffe Classes

Were Radcliffe graduates able to employ these strategies to achieve their goals of combining a career with marriage, or even career, marriage, and children? By establishing timelines for three Radcliffe College classes--1900, 1910, and 1920--we can determine when women married, when they entered careers, and whether they were able to manage both simultaneously. By drawing on a variety of sources located in the Radcliffe College archives--reunion books, survey responses, and correspondence--we can analyze the employment and family histories for all of these graduates. The reunion books offered what Robert Zussman calls an autobiographical occasion, in which one reports and synthesizes all aspects of one's life up to that moment.¹⁵ Because class

members reflected on their lives as well reported critical events, we can also examine how Radcliffe graduates interpreted these life events.

Radcliffe graduates in the three classes examined were far more likely to be gainfully employed than to marry. Whereas 94 percent of members of the class of 1900 were employed at some point in their lives, only 41 percent were ever married. For the class of 1910, the percent who had worked was relatively high, at 88 percent, but the marriage rate had risen only slightly, to 49 percent. The trend continued for the class of 1920, with 82 percent employed at some time, and the marriage rate finally surpassing 50 percent. The explanations for the low marriage rate range from proposals that college education made women more discerning in their life choices to discussions about men's presumed dislike for intellectual women.¹⁶ Whatever the reason, the low marriage rate would allow only a small number of women to combine marriage with a career.

Predictably, few women in any of the three classes successfully carried on a career and marriage simultaneously. In the 1900 class, only 11 percent, or 7 out of 63, were able to be employed and married at the same time. Over the next 20 years the rate rose to 27 percent, still astonishingly low in light of Radcliffe graduates' responses on the 1928 questionnaire. Nor, at least initially, did women combine marriage and careers for very long. Graduates of the 1900 class who combined their careers with marriage did so for an average of 4.5 years. Those graduating 20 years later, however, managed to combine marriage with a career for an average of approximately 13 years. Even more puzzling, the life course data show that most of the women who were able to combine marriage and a career achieved that goal later in life. For those who graduated in the

1900 class, women who combined marriage and career took an average of 27 years after graduation to accomplish their goal. The average time dropped to 13 years for the class of 1920, which is still a considerable delay.

Why did women wait so long to begin dual commitments to marriage and family? Did they, as the respondents to the 1928 questionnaire suggest, wait until their children entered school or left home? For the class of 1900, three of the seven bore no children, yet waited for an average of ten years after marriage to enter or resume a career. One of these graduates left or was forced out of her teaching position when she married and then waited 19 years before entering another vocation. Those who had children did not enter the paid labor force again, on average, until the last child was 19. Graduates of the classes of 1910 and 1920 had similar patterns, but they entered the labor force sooner--on average, approximately nine years after the birth of their last child. The differences between the earlier and later graduates might reflect a greater determination on the part of later graduates to implement various personal strategies to cope with the demands of husbands and child care, or alternatively, changes in the social climate, perhaps in response to women's activism emanating from the suffrage campaign, that eased the employment of married women and mothers.

Changes in the social climate did not include those in school systems, the largest employer of graduates in all three classes. The marriage ban was adopted by more and more communities during the 1920s and 1930s, making employment in any public school after marriage almost impossible. Many graduates entered teaching upon graduation, only to have their positions terminated when they married. In the class of 1900, for

instance, 19 women left teaching at the time of marriage, and in the 1910 class 44 stopped teaching when they married. Not all, of course, were terminated by the school system, but the prevailing campaign against married female teachers undoubtedly made it difficult to remain employed. In their reunion books, Radcliffe graduates lamented the interruption of their careers. One member of the class of 1920 reported the following to her classmates: "The years are divided into two parts: work following my A.B. and work following my MRS. Fortified by the former, I taught in the junior high school in Lexington. . . . In those days, a MRS marked finis to a public school career, so late in 1939 I took the present job of wife and mother."¹⁷ Some women in the class of 1920 found an opportunity to return to teaching during World War II when male teachers entered the armed services. One such woman informed her reunion class: "I taught until 1936 when married women could no longer teach. From 1943 to 1945, I have been a Military Substitute in the Math Department of the Malden schools."¹⁸

The ban against married women created special hardships for African American graduates, for whom career and marriage was an important goal but whose career alternatives were more limited, leading a greater proportion of them toward teaching. Such was the story of Nadine Wright, a 1917 graduate of Radcliffe College. Nadine Wright's African American parents taught in racially segregated schools in Oklahoma where they were harassed by the Ku Klux Klan. To ensure her safety they sent Nadine to Cambridge to live with an aunt; she was admitted to Radcliffe College in 1913. After Radcliffe she overcame racial barriers when she was hired to teach in the predominantly white Cambridge schools, only to face discrimination later as a married woman. In 1938,

after sixteen years of service, the Cambridge school committee dismissed Nadine Wright because she married. She was unable to find employment until the Second World War, when she was hired by the Navy. Released from the Navy after the war, Nadine, still unable to regain her regular teaching position, elected to teach students with cerebral palsy, for which she received numerous awards for excellence.¹⁹

Well aware of the social constraints that prevented Radcliffe graduates from achieving their life goals, early Radcliffe graduates participated in various social movements to increase women's options, including the option to combine careers and marriage. Some graduates reported participating in organized political activity to rescind the marriage bans (as well as the discriminatory double salary scales that prescribed that male teachers receive higher salaries than female teachers). For example, a member of the class of 1910 wrote to her reunion class that she worked with the American Federation of Teachers to initiate legislative bills for equal pay and the right of teachers to marry. Others found alternative employment in teaching by founding their own schools.²⁰

These efforts marked only a beginning for Radcliffe women in their long struggle to achieve the dual goals of family and career. Despite their positive views concerning married women's careers, few early Radcliffe women were able to "successfully carry on a career and marriage simultaneously." Even fewer could marry, have children, and continue careers. The difficulties faced by graduates in attempting marriage and schoolteaching careers illuminates the interplay between exclusion and inclusion. Once formally excluded from higher education, women flourished at Radcliffe. Equal opportunities after college, however, remained elusive. By the early twentieth century

when women were hired to teach in greater numbers, the conditions of inclusion formally demanded that women forgo marriage and family. In more subtle forms, but by no means less problematic, other professions that later became open to women excluded married women because they did not “adjust to the demands of childbearing and homemaking.” The integration of marriage, children, and career could have been achieved, as another graduate predicted, “with all conditions favorable.” The favorable conditions, for the most part, were not achieved, leaving this important task undone.

Notes

1. Ada Comstock, "The Fourth R for Women," *Century Magazine* 117 (1929): 413.
2. These percentages are from Barbara Solomon and Patricia Nolan, "Education, Work, Family, and Public Commitment in the Lives of Radcliffe Alumnae, 1883-1928," in *Changing Education: Women as Radicals and Conservatives*, ed. Joyce Antler and Sari Biklin (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 139-55.
3. Solomon and Nolan, "Education, Work, Family, and Public Commitment," 147-49.
4. Claudia Goldin, "The Meaning of College in the Lives of American Women: The Past One-Hundred Years," NBER Working Paper no. w4099 (June 1992), 2, 6-15.
5. See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 240-41, for a comparison of Radcliffe with the other Seven Sisters.
6. The quotations are from responses to the 1928 Radcliffe College Alumnae Association Survey, Radcliffe College Archives, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University [hereafter RCA] Respondents were given the assurance of confidentiality so no identifying characteristics of the respondents will be disclosed. Subsequent quotations from Radcliffe graduates are from this survey unless otherwise noted.
7. Class of 1910 50th Reunion Book, RCA.
8. Paul Starr, *The Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise of a Sovereign Profession and the Making of a Vast Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 120-22; Thomas Woody, *A History of Women's Education in the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: The Science Press, 1929), 2: 397-82.

9. Karen Berger Morello, *The Invisible Bar: The Woman Lawyer in America 1638 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1985), 68-70; Paula Nesbitt, *Feminization of the Clergy in America: Occupational and Organizational Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23-24; see Barbara Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women: A History of Woman and Higher Education in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), chap. 8, for a discussion of career opportunities for college-educated women in the early twentieth century.
10. Solomon, *In the Company of Educated Women*, 76; data for calculations for the percentage of graduates of 1900, 1910, and 1920 was compiled from reunion books, individual files, undergraduate records, correspondence, and the 1928 Radcliffe College Alumnae Association Survey; "Black Alumnae of Radcliffe College through 1950," typescript, RCA.
11. *Course Schedule for The Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women 1895* (Cambridge, Mass.: W. H. Wheeler Printer, 1895), 9; *Radcliffe College Course Schedule, 1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: W. H. Wheeler Printer, 1920), 30. For a discussion of these arrangements with public schools see *Radcliffe College Annual Reports, 1916-1917*, 55-56.
12. A. E. Winship, "Should Married Women Teach?" *Journal of Education* 64, no.21 (Nov. 29, 1906): 581, reprinted from the *Boston Globe* editorial page, Nov. 11, 1906; Duane Moury, "Married Teachers in the Schools," in *Journal of Education* (Aug. 28, 1913), 176-77.

13. Claudia Goldin, in her book *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), discusses the scope and rationale for marriage bars in the first half of the twentieth century. See pp. 160-79.
14. These estimates were made from life course data on graduates from the classes of 1910, 1920, and 1930.
15. Robert Zussman, in his essay "Autobiographical Occasions," *Contemporary Sociology* 25, no.2 (1996), argues that one must recognize the social structuring of occasions that allow for biographical accounts. Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi employs this approach in her book analyzing high school reunions as autobiographical occasions. See Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, *After Pomp and Circumstance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
16. For a discussion of these proposals see Goldin, "The Meaning of College," 7-12.
17. Radcliffe Class of 1920 Fiftieth Reunion book, RCA.
18. Radcliffe Class of 1920 Reunion Book, RCA.
19. Radcliffe Class of 1917 Fiftieth Reunion Book, RCA; Obituaries, *Boston Globe*, Aug. 1, 1994.
20. Class of 1910 Twenty-Fifth Reunion Book.